

## **Fulfilling the Promise: African American Educators Teach for Democracy in Jim Crow's South**

**By Patrice Preston-Grimes**

Of all the instruments for the maintenance of a government, the public school is recognized as the most powerful. The strength of America has been in the transformation of people from other parts of the world into American citizens loyal to a new country and to a new way of life full of opportunities for the common man. The building of this citizenship has been the duty primarily of the American public school system. It is the backbone of our democracy.

*Let's Be Honest about Democracy*, NAACP pamphlet, 1939, p. 12

In 1939, leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) challenged the nation's school leaders and teachers to make good

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on the Founding Fathers' promise to educate youth for their future civic roles. Influential African American scholar Charles Wesley echoed the NAACP's sentiments in his 1941 essay that encouraged teachers to make democracy "the guiding philosophy in our [Negro] schools" through practical as well as theoretical examples. For Wesley and NAACP leaders, one role of schools was to reinforce the ideals that citizenship in a democracy should promote "the presentation of truth . . . freedom of speech, press, pulpit and assembly . . . the right to strike, the right to a fair trial

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[and] freedom from unlawful search and seizure” (Wesley, p.73). Consistent with mainstream civic education discourse of the 1930s and 1940s that emphasized the need to create good school citizens, Black and White educators appeared to promote mutual objectives that would encourage individuals to work together for a “common good” (Dewey 1909, 1916).

Ironically, in the same NAACP pamphlet that contained the civic education rhetoric, the organization also listed as its goals to stop lynching and hate crimes, to secure fair legal representation for African Americans in state courts, and to lobby through the judicial system for equal pay and better conditions in segregated public schools (NAACP, 1939, p.8). The NAACP platform also addressed the need to create greater public awareness of discrimination and to lessen fears of violent attacks that many African Americans confronted daily in the segregated South. Leaders encouraged members, whenever possible, to bring pressure on local communities to stop widespread racially motivated acts of violence (Anderson, 1988; Grant, 1993; Mangum, 1940).

Indeed, America’s civic community from the end of the Great Depression through the post World War II years was hardly rational or racially neutral in its uneven and unequal treatment of African Americans and other underrepresented groups (Blades & Richardson, 2006; Dunn, 1916). Conventional civic scholarship of the era has ignored the complexities of a racially segregated society that in theory would have made it difficult, if not illogical, for African American educators to embrace and promote democracy within their communities (Dewey, 1916; Hartmann, 1948; Lazerson, 1978; Wesley, 1942)

Given the climate of social and political contradictions in the United States, how did African American educators teach students about equality, freedom, and justice in a separate and unequal society? This article addresses a basic yet complex question through the voices of five African American educators who taught in one Southern state’s segregated schools before the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Recollections of their teaching experiences, coupled with historical data, provide context on social studies and civic education that is rarely addressed in historical civic discourse that often interpreted dominant political and social views without regard for perspectives of African Americans and other underrepresented groups (Hertzberg, 1981; Karier, 1978; Saxe, 1991).

### **African American Perspectives on Civic Life**

Central to the study of 20<sup>th</sup> century African American life and thought is the concept of a *double consciousness*, first articulated by scholar W. E. B. Dubois. In his classic study, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/2005), Dubois captured the essence of living in a racially divided society as,

    this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others . . . of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in an amused contempt and pity.

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One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, *whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder* [emphasis added]. (p.9)

This double-consciousness—the ability to define and to maintain a positive, yet realistic self-awareness, while responding to negative messages in the world-at-large—articulated a key premise in African American scholarly thought of the era. Dubois believed that advancing the theory of double consciousness in a repressive society was essential to African Americans’ achievement of a positive individual identity, while pursuing the collective goals of racial uplift, pride, and progress (Anderson, 1988; Gaines, 1997). Nearly 100 years later, scholar Roger Wilkins (2001) articulated the same concerns when he wrote that America gave

descendents of slaves and slave owners, much of my existence, the freedom I cherish, and the democratic citizenship that I have used relentlessly for the past century. . . I am black—I cannot avoid it. . . I am American—I must confront it. (p.5)

Ironically, the contradiction of living by one set of rules, yet often acting inconsistently with those rules, is not unique to African Americans. White Americans have also experienced a similar “two-ness” of sorts since colonial times. The Founding Fathers, for example, crafted democratic ideals and citizenship practices that they were willing to fight for; yet they excluded women and enslaved Africans from receiving those same rights and privileges. As slaveholders themselves, George Mason, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and James Madison “lived lives cushioned by slavery. . . They created a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that Whites should be supreme. They celebrated freedom while stealing the substance of life from the people they owned” (Wilkins, 2001, p.5). The complexities of their thinking and consequences of their acts remain today, as descendants of the former enslaved and their masters make meaning of their interwoven roles and relationships in American history and national culture (Lewis & Onuf, 1999).

In many public schools of the Jim Crow South, educators received local community support to teach a written social studies curricula that included studying citizenship principles (Wood, 1937). Some educators also found common ground and support teaching “community civics” through classroom-based social studies programs (Dunn, 1916; Hertsberg, 1981). Other school personnel in one Southern state even developed specific curricular and instructional objectives and activities for Negro elementary and high schools. By doing so, they believed that parents, teachers, and students could implement “life-related teaching” in their local communities to model prescribed social studies and civic behaviors that reflected the ideals and values of those in charge (Hubbard, 1938a; 1938b).

However, some African American educators approached teaching social studies and civic education differently. They applied Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s (1999) concept of *politically relevant teaching* in their classrooms to model how African American educators could make sense of the contradictions in a racially discriminatory society,

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yet prepare students for a better day. By definition, a politically relevant teacher understands that the suppression of anyone's democratic rights (and responsibilities) directly opposes the goals of a just and fair society. Even if the intent of the law excluded them, the five teachers in this study demonstrated how to teach that law to create a "political clarity" for students and themselves (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). Guided by their double consciousness and sound professional preparation, they shaped their classroom environments and framed social studies teaching and civic education to be meaningful and liberating in a time of discrimination.

### **Conducting the Study**

Archival records, including state department of education curriculum guides, were key data sources for this study, as well as oral history interviews (Hubbard, 1938a, 1938b; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Rury, 1993). From these sources, including educational reports and participants' artifacts, I made notes to make sense of all data. I recognized and chronicled events, identified similar and unique responses to these events, and created initial lists to discover themes that related to civic participation, social studies instruction, and social behaviors both in and outside of the classroom.

Using information from the data, I developed an interview protocol. Guided by Seidman's (1998) three-stage process, I interviewed participants separately, conducting three individual sessions with each participant over a one-month period. Each face-to-face conversation in participants' homes varied from 75 to 120 minutes. The sessions were audio-taped and transcribed, and data were organized into categories related to the study questions. Sample interview questions included: (a) As a teacher in segregated schools, what do you remember about your classroom? (b) What were the classroom and school rules? (c) What kinds of lessons did you teach in social studies/civic classes? (d) Did you teach respect for the law? If so, how? and (e) What is one thing that you want others to know about teaching and learning to be a citizen in a segregated school environment? Participants were given written transcripts to verify conversations.

The five teachers in this study were retired African American female public educators who taught in a Southern state's segregated K-12 public schools before 1954 (see Table 1). I located them through nominations from retired K-12 teachers and professional and social networks. No male teachers were interviewed because nominated male candidates did not teach within the specified time frames of this study (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 113; Spradley, 1979, p. 47).

As I was interested in the social studies and civic education beliefs and practices in schools, I identified participants who taught all subjects in elementary school classrooms, or who taught high school social studies, history, and civics or government courses. I contacted them via telephone, answered their initial questions, and gained their permission to conduct face-to-face interviews. At the time of the study, teachers ranged in age from 77 years to 86 years and were in reasonably

**Table I**  
**Teacher Profiles**

Teacher	Teaching Years	Formal Education	Teaching Site (circa 1950)	Grade Levels (*circa 1950)
I. J. Baker (86) never married	1940-1981	B. A. Social Science with certificates	Rural/city	1, 2*, 3, 7-8
G. H. Davis (78) divorced	1952-1990	B. A. Elem. Ed M. A. Reading	Rural	2*, 1-8
B. C. Harvey (77) widow	1947-1981	B. A. & M. S. Social Science	Small town	2*, 7-8*, 9-12
D. E. Miller (80?) widow	1948-1984	B. A. & M. A. Business Ed.	Rural	1-6*, 3-4*, 8-12
R. S. Watson (86) widow	1951-1981	B. A. Home Econ., M.A. Elem Ed	Rural	3-4*, 9-11

good health, with no observable physical impairments. All had remained active in at least one civic or local social community group in their senior years.

After each interview, I wrote impressions and notes to aid interpretation of the setting and data. I conducted follow-up telephone calls to capture details and clarify statements from the transcripts and my notes. A colleague read transcriptions and provided comments on the findings and themes at specific stages of analysis. Then, I coded the transcripts using descriptors such as *teaching methods* for explanations of classroom practice, *discipline and class rules* for examples of explicit behaviors that supported order and structure, and *protection* for instances when teachers instructed or intervened to avoid punitive actions directed at students (Seidman, 1998). Using Wolcott's (2001) aspects of data description, analysis, and interpretation, I compared and contrasted the interview data and notes with documents and literature on the beliefs and practices of African American educators in the same state and time period. Finally, I drew conclusions and reviewed data for counterexamples to those conclusions, with the goal of providing structure and coherence for an accurate account that remained true to established historical events (Rury, 2002).

### **Volatile Times in the Jim Crow South**

Three key occurrences converged in Southern states between the Great Depression and the end of World War II to mark the region as a bedrock of racial, political, and social turmoil. These events were: (1) the organized calls to end to public violence against African Americans, (2) discriminatory treatment of African American veterans and newly registered voters, and (3) increased demands from African Americans to improve public schooling conditions and opportunities. A brief description of these events provides insight into the tensions and contradic-

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tions that teachers and students faced daily in their efforts to gain a fair education in a segregated society.

In 1939, the NAACP's goals for equal rights were clear: mob violence and lynching must stop, and equal treatment for all in the courts and schools must begin. This position was fueled by a documented history of brutality. Between 1900 and 1946, for example, of the 1973 persons in the U.S. who were killed by lynching, 1771 were African Americans (Guzman & Hughes, 1947, p. 30). Although the overall number of lynchings recorded annually in the U.S. declined steadily between 1937 and 1946, six African Americans died by mob violence in 1946 alone—a significant annual reported increase from the previous year (Guzman & Hughes, p. 307). African American press accounts of the upsurge of mob violence caused concern within NAACP leadership, especially when reports surfaced on the mistreatment of African American veterans in the South and on alleged police brutality against those who defied local segregation laws (Simmons, 1998). The NAACP position was clear: violence against all people had to be addressed because “as long as the terror of lynching mob [hung] over anyone in America, there [was] no possibility of the enjoyment of full civil rights by either Negroes or underprivileged Whites” (NAACP, 1939, p.8).

Secondly, a backlash against African American advancement after World War II showed a temporary, yet significant, gain in voter registration numbers in one Southern state. A rise in discriminatory voter registration laws, threats of “economic reprisals,” random acts of violence, and the lack of united African American leadership in the state's rural areas were key problems (Bacote, 1957). Tensions surfaced in many Southern communities when African Americans could not vote in key primary or general elections, were directed to pay poll taxes to register to vote, or had to pass literacy tests to cast their ballots (Kennedy, 1946; Logan, 1945). This was disappointing to many African Americans, who believed that they would finally gain equal rights because they had proven their loyalty to the United States during wartime (Ernst, 1954). Although African American labor leader A. Philip Randolph was one of a vocal few who questioned whether African Americans should be loyal and expect to fully participate in a system that upheld Jim Crow laws, others maintained a heightened sense of racial and political consciousness and demonstrated that their “basic American loyalty remain[ed] unquestioned” (Ernst, 1954, p. 219).

Third, efforts to improve African Americans' educational access gained momentum in the postwar era. NAACP efforts to crack the higher education admissions ceiling persisted, resulting in a series of court decisions that paved the way for African Americans to attend public colleges and universities (Kluger, 1975). The successful outcome of those decisions laid a foundation for the U.S. Supreme Court's hearing of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1953. Clearly, racial discrimination extended to K-12 schools, as evidenced by unequal salaries, poor facilities, and unfair educational policies, that kept African Americans in segregated public school environments.

As momentum for the *Brown* case rose in legal circles, African American scholars were developing teaching models to prepare educators for the impending change. One educator, W. G. Daniel (1950), outlined a six-point civic education program in the *Journal of Negro Education* that included formal classroom instruction that focused on developing interracial communication skills and a greater decision-making for all community groups in educational issues, whether local schools were “segregated, integrated, or in transition” (p. 395). He supported teaching school children about democracy, equity, and justice because he believed that youth were more willing than their parents were to alter their attitudes and behaviors about race relations (pp. 397-398). Given the changing legal and social climate, the subsequent contributions of the featured educators are particularly significant.

### **Teaching for a Better Day**

Five Georgia African American teachers believed that their students could be taught to comply with the social and legal limits of their second-class status, and at the same time learn to overcome its constraints. Based on the premise that defeating injustice and inequality would require *intellectual* as opposed to physical resistance, they trained students to know, understand, and apply the tenets in the Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights within their school settings. Moreover, they believed that students would ably exercise their constitutional rights as adults when the opportunity in the larger society enabled them to do so. Findings indicate that these educators (1) instructed students in specific social studies and civics principles through formal and informal lessons, (2) promoted racial uplift by teaching self-respecting behaviors and decision-making skills, and (3) modeled and reinforced codes of social conduct to protect students from potentially violent public encounters, while enabling them to maintain their personal dignity.

### **Teaching and Modeling Civic Action**

None of the elder educators interviewed for this study remembered any specific social studies or civic education training or related materials available in their local school districts in their early years of teaching. However, a document review of the 1938 state social studies and civics-related curriculum designed for Negro teachers cited specific learning outcome goals designed for students to demonstrate citizenship knowledge and skills (Hubbard, 1938a, 1938b). The teachers’ inability to recall specific professional development activities or materials in this area may support findings that the quality and extent of the social studies delivery system for many African American teachers throughout the state at that time needed significant improvement, especially in rural communities (Dean, 1955). Nevertheless, all five educators reported teaching social studies and citizenship principles in varying forms in their classrooms. The following summarizes some of their teaching approaches and methods.

*Early grade school programs.* The primary and elementary educators described



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teaching social studies and civic lessons that focused on the local community. The study of holidays and celebrations was a popular elementary theme:

When we did social studies, most didn't have a whole lot of things for social studies, but we had units and we tried to include social studies and everything else. You know, reading, math, art, everything in there. You were even teaching something about Thanksgiving. You'd have the children to do a little play and dress up like Indians and Pilgrims, and they would draw cornucopia, [the] Mayflower, whatever, and you'd put those things up in the room. . . Always display children's artwork everywhere. And we'd teach them a little dance, an Indian dance or whatever your unit was about. And you'd try to incorporate all these different things in there. (G. H. Davis, personal communication, January 21, 2005)

Consistent with the teachers' beliefs that they should offer broader content than established curriculum requirements, most recalled adding contributions of African Americans to their lessons during the school year. Some taught about significant African American people and events on a regular basis:

Each teacher used to would have to—once a month, each teacher would have to have charge of the Negro history play. I had—I read a lot, you know—and I had a play. The boys and girls recommended themselves, and I had these three boys . . . all three of them have done well [in their adult lives] . . . they did it so well that they were promoted to do something else bigger. And you had some . . . you had a feeling of accomplishment. (I. J. Baker, personal communication, January 25, 2005)

Others planned annual programs that parents and community members could attend.

Oh, yes, we did, but you know, a long time ago, we had . . . Negro History Week, and then later it went to Negro History Month, February or something. We didn't do it all year, but of course . . . I'd have pictures all in the room, Mary [McCloud] Bethune, and then we would talk about it. And then sometimes we would get somebody to come in and talk to the children about that kind of thing . . . somebody from the local community, you know, somebody from Atlanta, somebody in social studies, or see, I worked on the elementary side, and we had another wing, the high school side, and we could always get a high school teacher to come over . . . Mr. Lily, he was in science. He would come over and [talk to the students]. (Baker, January 25, 2005)

The teachers' efforts to include African American history were important because conventional text books and other school materials of the period often omitted subjects related to race, different social classes, gender, and ethnicity (Pierce, 1930; Watson, 1936). Teaching about African American contributions to education, the humanities, and the sciences offered a counter narrative to the predominantly negative racial images of the day. This suggests that the published scholarship on African American life and culture may have reached a wider audience than has been documented in traditional historical and civic accounts (Carpenter, 1941; Woodson, 1919, 1932).



*Secondary school teaching and learning.* At the high school level, civics and government class activities were a key part of the core social studies curriculum in one state's urban areas. The curriculum at Atlanta (GA)'s Booker T. Washington High School, for example, included a year-long civics course for ninth graders and was one of three state segregated high schools to do so (Jones, 1941; Sowell, 1976). Under the leadership of principal Charles Lincoln Harper, Washington High School maintained an environment of "support, encouragement, and rigid [academic] standards" (Sowell, 1976) with a reputation for a no-nonsense approach to schooling.

At the same time, two teachers in different area schools recalled the longstanding tradition of supervising high school students in a school-wide simulation that re-created political party conventions and national elections every four years. Each echoed the other's account of the event.

They [the students] went through it step-by-step. Each classroom—say, maybe my homeroom, we might be Republicans. We have been voting or working with this person that's running for president. And the classrooms were divided, and they would go out campaigning within the school to different classrooms [saying] why you should vote for me, why you should do this for me . . . . At the end, the day we would have the election; they would have the different people—they'd have to look up this information, now—I [name] hailing from the state of Georgia, the peach state, the this state, and everything we were noted for, they would cast their votes. It was school-wide . . . .what I'm talking about. (B. C. Harvey, Personal communication, January 22, 2005)

The teachers reflected that the campaigning tradition was a school favorite, not only for government students, but also for faculty and staff who guided students' project preparation in English, art, and music classes. The interdisciplinary learning project fulfilled state curricular objectives to teach students to "understand[ing] the machinery and operations of government," "understand [ing] how organized groups influence government," and "apply[ing] scientific studies in the solution of community problems" (Wood, 1937, pp. 37-38). These activities also created opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration for civic education instruction and gave teachers the opportunity to interject "politically relevant" teaching into state mandated curricula without the scrutiny of school board administrators.

In that same vein, one of the most compelling examples of the teacher's role in educating students for citizenship was one teacher's account of her own civic activities outside of the classroom.

I was in that group that had to register the men [for military service]. And 1940 was when the was began, and men had to come up to be drafted, and we had to register [them]. We [teachers] also—they rationed food at that time and we had to get those applications for the rationing books and write them out for the people in the community. That was our extra job that we [teachers] had to do . . . . that was true. That was one of the things we had to do, but in order to get those men drafted, the teachers were the only ones that were capable of doing it [because the

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men could not read or write]. They [the men] couldn't vote . . . that wasn't even ever discussed. But there were people that were conscious of it, and they wanted that type of independence. (Baker, January, 25, 2005)

In her efforts to help local men meet military service requirements in wartime and aid neighbors' basic needs, the teacher believed that she was doing her civic duty by linking educational utility (i.e., literacy) with civic responsibility and setting an example for her students to emulate. Ultimately, teachers understood that students would never be able to exercise their civic and constitutional rights effectively if they did not know and practice them responsibly.

#### **Teaching Self-Respect and Decision-Making**

On a more social level, the teachers reported elementary and high school activities that stressed an orderly environment and respect for the rights of self and others. They set clear codes of conduct for students' behavior and enforced classroom rules throughout the school year. The purposes were not merely punitive, but designed to instill self-discipline and to reinforce thoughts and actions that contributed to wise decision-making. One elementary teacher described her procedures:

There are some things that you [students] must learn that you do and you don't. So, you make your chart, and you put that chart on . . . you have them numbered. We must not chew gum in class. We must raise our hand when we do such-and-such a thing, and all kinds of little rules like that. And if you don't put them on the chart, you can put them around. I eventually found some I could order that you put around the walls and different little things like that. And I'm thinking about citizenship . . . Now, some people liked to give little children favors . . . I call that bribery. Children have to earn what they get. So, you see, that was just a policy of mine. You don't get anything unless you work for it. You have to work for whatever you get. So, if you got your lesson and did extra things, then you were able to maybe color or read an extra book. (R. S. Watson, personal communication, January 31, 2005)

She kept a written record to evaluate students' behavior and work habits by recording notes for items such as "Do they respect authority?" and "Are they attentive?" She used these and other guidelines to document progress report grades and support feedback given to parents at various times during the school year (Watson: 1). In her efforts to channel the students' personal and social actions into positive behaviors, this educator believed that she was teaching them a code of conduct that would dispel popular notions of African Americans' inferiority (within the larger community) and also giving students the strategies to improve their own self images.

Another elementary teacher had similar written conduct guidelines to structure her class environment:

We set out rules when we got in there about what they were supposed to do . . . No talking back, and at that time, we didn't allow them to chew gum. And boys pull off the hats when they enter the school and . . . there were rules that were

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not written, but they were just expected of them. (D. E. Miller, personal communication, January 20, 2005)

Some of the unwritten rules included being on time to school daily, being prepared with school assignments, and keeping a clean classroom and school entry area. These secondary teachers set and enforced classroom procedures as well, although sometimes these were not as explicit as for younger students. One described her procedures for a new high school class:

I didn't have a lot [of rules]. First day you came into my class, I think I'd give a prayer today. Introduce myself. And my last word to them was this: If you don't bother me, then I won't bother you. If you don't talk, then I won't have to ask you to stop talking. If you disobey me, then I'll have to do something to take care of that . . . . And I would make examples so they know I meant what I said. [If] Someone just insisted on talking, and I asked them two or three times to please be quiet or cut it down. No, they weren't going to do it. Well, then, you come up here and you see me. And I want you to write me a little essay on the subject, "Why it is important to be quiet in class." And I'd tell them they'd have to write so many pages, either five or six pages . . . . handwritten pages. (Harvey, January 14, 2005)

Although her high school principal had rules and regulations, the teacher did not recall enforcement to be as major an issue as she perceives it to be in today's schools. She explained,

Well, I didn't have problems with behavior then like teachers have now. I had a lot of parents that were very cooperative. You needed parents on your side if those children were . . . . If they knew you were going to see their parents. Talk to them probably and include them in there, you don't have a lot of discipline problems. (Harvey, January 14, 2005)

With the support of parents, these teachers believed that the classroom setting was a key site for students to practice self-control and responsibility that they would later apply to larger, public settings. Under their close and constant supervision, teachers expected elementary and high students to follow specific class rules. As the primary disciplinarian during school hours, the teachers held students accountable for their behavior with clearly defined rewards and consequences. Self-reflection and the ability to make sound judgments in a variety of circumstances could mean the difference between safety and harm, as described in the next section.

***Teaching Survival Skills for Protection***

Given the racially oppressive climate and the social systems that supported it, African American students in the segregated South had to learn how to adjust their social behavior when outside of the confines of the classroom and school. These measures were essential to their safety, and in some cases, to their survival (Foster, 1991). Although the outsider's (white) interpretation may describe this behavior as passive or non-confrontational, internalizing (and not acting on) this behavior might

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have kept many students from physical harm. In the teachers' minds, they were saving their children from, rather than sacrificing them to, the whims of potential verbal insult, mob violence, and brutality. For example, when students traveled together away from school, they could be physically or emotionally harmed if they violated social rules of segregation, especially in public spaces (e.g., do not use public restrooms or water fountains marked "White only"). One teacher remembers her own early experience of breaking the rules in public:

When I went downtown as a child myself, I couldn't touch anything. I could just go and look, and I remember two or three times, the lady [in the store] popping my hand because I picked up something to look at. But the little white boy was standing right over there, and he picked up . . . [something], and she didn't say a word to him. But I had to put it down. You know, you don't have any business doing that. (Watson, January 22, 2005)

In other ways, public racial discrimination was more subtle than the overt slap on the wrist. One teacher recalled that on field trips, her classes had to wait their turn in line for long periods of time to enter a local theater and could not use the front entrance of the theater building.

. . . I guess I dealt with some things that maybe I wouldn't had I not had the children [with me on a field trip]. For instance, I took my children to the outside, what's the name of that theater? [The Fox Theater] . . . Yes, The Fox Theater. Well, they wanted to know why you had to go up outside [of the building] to go up the steps [to the balcony to the separate section for Negroes] and couldn't go in the front door, sure, and that kind thing. (Davis, January 21, 2005)

To minimize the impact such incidents, teachers reviewed rules for proper field trip conduct in advance, encouraging children to set an excellent behavioral example for others to emulate; some would even practice certain behaviors in class before venturing out in public. The teachers believed that the school classroom was a safe haven and a trusting place to model, interpret, and manipulate the images surrounding them. The instructions were consistent with the state's early-elementary civic curriculum guidelines that promoted "observing standards of conduct that have been set up by home, school, and community groups" (Wood, 1937, pp. 38-39). However, the teachers also used the trips to provide a "window to the world" to give students a truer sense of what life could be outside of the safety of community boundaries.

Given that the physical separation of the races was instituted and enforced by prevailing local laws, many African American teachers described the need to filter out negative stereotypes and images from the younger children, especially in public places. This was the most direct example of teaching students how to develop and maintain a state of double-consciousness without succumbing to its negative effect. As one teacher reported:

[Segregation in public places] Now, that's not the same as [taking trips with] the school, because they [elementary students] asked many times why they couldn't sit on those

seats in the drug store in Jonesboro and drink a milkshake and eat the ice cream, you know, but I didn't take them in there. I'd take them somewhere else, *because I knew what they'd have to face* [emphasis added]. (Davis, January 21, 2005)

Another teacher expressed her concern about exposing children to injustice early in life,

I don't think that you should burden children with some things at a certain age. Now for an example . . . [pause] children cannot comprehend all of those things. Neither can they react to things when they are like that [upset] if you teach a child to respect a grown person, that if he's Black, if he's White, or Yellow, or Blue. Respect them because they are of age. (Watson, January 31, 2005)

The teachers' deliberate modeling of protective behaviors demonstrated their desire to shield their students from the consequences of racial attacks and insults until existing laws were struck down and the fears of personal harm and random acts of violence subsided. Although the obstacles to their teaching were explicit and direct, they persevered to overcome the challenges and empower students for their future civic roles.

### **Bridging to the Future**

Through teaching by example, the actions of the five African American educators in this study expand our historical perspective to understand the unique social and cultural contexts in which 20<sup>th</sup>-century African American students learned to be citizens. The educators understood that their professional behaviors, as well as their content knowledge, were tools to combat social inequities. In subtle yet very powerful ways, they modeled personal dignity and clearness of thought to create spaces for "intellectual resistance" in their classrooms (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999).

Unlike school desegregation movements of the modern civil rights era that featured K-12 students on the front lines, some teachers of the *pre-Brown* period chose not to put their children at the forefront of the struggle, but shielded them physically and psychologically in a racially tense environment. Their empowering responses to Dubois' double-consciousness dilemma conveyed courageous role models that transcended the established patterns of the times. They believed that until a civic community truly reflected the common good for all, their students must understand the *two-ness* of their lives and learn to navigate its complexities outside of the safety of their segregated school settings. With the support of local African American communities, the teachers modeled democratic principles that none could exercise, but all hoped to realize fully in the coming decades. In a sense, their teaching was fulfilling the promise of citizenship in an era ripe with political inequities and social contradictions.

### **Teaching for Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Today's educators face different, yet equally significant challenges in teaching students the knowledge, skills, and attitudes for authentic civic participation. Unlike the segregated schooling described in this study, many classrooms now consist of teachers and students of varying cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds whose concepts of citizenship and democracy differ (Delpit, 1995; Pang & Gibson, 2001). Nevertheless, this historical investigation documents that not only was civic education taught at a critical time in students' lives, but that the teachers remained engaged in their own practice, in spite of the contradictions from the larger society.

To bridge present differences, a teacher's first step toward addressing equality, fairness and justice in the classroom is to acknowledge one's own positions (and biases) and how they may shape our thinking and pedagogy. In recent years, some African American educators, for example, have expressed concerns that their beliefs and experiences, especially related to education for citizenship and social justice, are not considered in curricular and policy decisions (Ladson-Billings, G. 2003). Professional development opportunities (at school and district levels) could allow educators to study and reflect on evidence to broaden their perspectives on education for citizenship.

Classroom teachers can also include multiple point-of-view in class readings, plan focused student discussions, and create assignments that probe students' civic knowledge and attitudes (e.g., journal writing, role play, simulations) to encourage thoughtful discourse. Hess' (2009) recent study on the uses of structured class discussion to engage critical thinking highlights the challenges and opportunities that emerge when teachers facilitate thoughtful dialogue. Especially in middle and high school class settings, teaching civic responsibility must be explicit and relevant, as many youth remain civically illiterate and disengaged from the democratic process at-large (Levine, 2007).

Likewise, today's teachers must move beyond traditional curriculum, texts, and established civic discourse models to engage a new, younger generation of citizens. In the same manner that the elder teachers connected national political events to students' local experiences, 21<sup>st</sup> century educators must link global and current news events to students' daily lives. This can be achieved in at least two ways: (1) through service learning and civic-action initiatives, within and outside of the school setting, and (2) using new multimedia sources (e.g., blogs, podcasts, on-line social networks) in their instruction to demonstrate how civic deliberation and action can impact today's issues. The effectiveness of electronic media to reach youth in the 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign demonstrated how a traditionally controlled system of political organization and participation was expanded to connect and involve new, young voices in the electoral process (Carr, 2008; Fetherstonhaugh, 2008).

As we enter a new political era with unprecedented challenges at home and abroad, a vibrant, active citizenry is crucial to improving the quality of life for this

and future generations. The study of African American educators' professional practices from a previous era highlights the importance of engaging youth in meaningful civic behaviors and instruction at an early age to prepare them for these challenges. Fulfilling the promise of democracy in our diverse and expanding civic community has never been a shortsighted goal. It requires continued study, debate, and action in schools and communities to fully realize that promise for all.

### Notes

Central to this research were the oral and career histories of the five teachers, whose names have been changed for anonymity. At the time of the completion of this article, four of the five were still living in local communities in which they taught and have remained active in their professional social club.

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